

telephone number) is retrieved from a database, indexed by the delivery item's identifier. Notification contact information may be included in the sender supplied data referred to in the previous stage. Notification contact information may also be obtained from independent third-party sources. For example, a recipient's telephone number may be looked up in a phone book or on-line telephone directory website. In another embodiment, the recipient's contact information is affixed to the mail item, for example, as a bar code or data matrix code containing the recipient's email address.

[036] In yet another embodiment, notification is via a conventional physically delivered letter that arrives while mail item 100 is in transit, sent from a post office local to the recipient. The letter is sent to the address to which mail item 100 is being delivered by a post office close to the recipient address. For example, when a mail item, such as mail item 100, is mailed from a sender in Boston, Massachusetts, to a recipient in San Francisco, California, the San Francisco Post Office prints a letter to the recipient. The letter, informing the recipient that mail item 100 was mailed in Boston, is delivered to the recipient while mail item 100 is en route. The letter originating in Boston may then be actually printed and delivered in San Francisco in time to be delivered on the next day. Thus, the recipient is notified in sufficient time to provide instructions regarding mail item 100.

[037] In one embodiment of a system consistent with the principles of the present invention, the recipient is notified that mail item 100 is en route soon after the delivery service takes initial possession of the mail item. Early notification reduces unnecessary transportation of the mail item. For example, if the recipient of

the parcel being delivered from Boston to San Francisco wishes to have the parcel delivered to a hotel room in Chicago instead, early notification allows the recipient to redirect the parcel before it passes Chicago on its way to the West coast, saving time and transportation costs. In one variation of this embodiment, mail item 100 is not transported from the origin location until instructions are received from the recipient.

[038] In another embodiment, the recipient is notified after mail item 100 has traveled some distance toward the addressed delivery point. Later notification allows the delivery service to more accurately inform the recipient when mail item 100 will arrive at the delivery point, because mail item 100 will be closer to the delivery point. With more accurate information, the recipient can better manage delivery of the mail item.

[039] In yet another embodiment, the recipient is notified more than once as mail item 100 progresses along the delivery route. For example, the recipient is given an early notification that mail item 100 has been sent to him, without specifying a delivery date or specifying an estimated range of delivery dates. Later, after mail item 100 has been moved, the recipient is given another notification, specifying much more accurately the expected delivery date. In yet another embodiment, the recipient is notified after an actual delivery attempt fails--e.g., in a situation where a "yellow slip" would normally be left at the recipient address after the delivery attempt.

[040] Although the above embodiments are described with the recipient receiving the notification, other individuals or organizations may receive the notification consistent with the principles of the present invention. For example, the

sender may receive the notification simultaneously with the recipient. Alternatively, the sender may receive the notification rather than the recipient. Other variations of providing the notification to one or more individuals or organizations interested in delivery of the mail item are consistent with the principles of the present invention.

[041] Next, systems and methods consistent with the principles of the present invention accept, e.g., from the recipient, instructions regarding delivery of mail item 100 (stage 220). The recipient may, for example, communicate instructions over the same channel used to notify the recipient in the previous stage (e.g., email, telephone, website, etc.). In one embodiment, the recipient's instruction include a new delivery point (e.g., "deliver to my office instead of my home"), a new delivery time (e.g., "deliver today at 7:00 p.m."), and other information, such as special delivery instructions (e.g. "place inside garage," or "hold item for one week, I will pick up at Post Office on that date"). In one embodiment, if the recipient makes no response to the notification, is delivered to the addressed delivery point according to procedures well known to those skilled in the art.

[042] Instructions may be accepted from individuals or organizations other than the recipient. For example, systems and methods consistent with the principles of the present invention may accept instructions from the sender or the mailer. One skilled in the art would recognize that a wide variety of instructions sources may be used consistent with the principles of the present invention.

[043] In stage 225, a notification is sent, e.g., to the sender (or mailer), to indicate acceptance of the instructions. As in stage 215, the notification may be sent to a variety of individuals or organizations, such as, the sender, the mailer, or the